



How to Research a College

Sometime in their junior, or maybe even their senior year, high school students will generate a list of colleges based on some general characteristics such as size, majors, and location. When it comes to narrowing the list, many students are at a loss of how to do it. There's no magic formula for deciding between schools. Ultimately, students need to research them further to find their differences. But how do you research a college?

Here's how to start.

In ancient times, before the internet, beyond some brochures, you found out about a college by requesting the college catalog. Even with all the information available on the internet, the college catalog is still a valuable resource.

Look at the college catalog for general graduation requirements. Some colleges are very flexible in their distribution requirements. Honestly, my son is going to graduate without having to take a math class. Yes, I may have issues with that. Others have extensive and specific course requirements for graduation. How much do these requirements differ between the colleges and how important is it to you?

As you browse through all the courses listed in the catalog, remember these are possible courses. Many will not be offered every semester or even every year. So you'll need to check the course schedule for the number and types of classes offered in your probable major. This is especially important if you are considering attending a smaller college. The focus of departments can vary dramatically between colleges.

For those attending larger universities, use the course schedule to check the class size for upper division classes. While you should expect larger classes for introductory classes, the class sizes should decrease as you progress in your degree.

When you're researching the class schedule, check to see which professors are teaching the classes and how many. In other words, are the full-time faculty in the department teaching the classes or are they being assigned to a variety of part-time faculty. In general, extensive use of part-time faculty is not good thing since they don't have the same amount of time to prepare for the classes and may not be around when you need letters of recommendation or research opportunities.

Find out the college's policy of accepting AP classes, dual credit, and IB classes for credit. Don't just look at the general policy, look for the specific requirements for the classes you have taken. For larger universities, this can get you out of the large introductory classes.

Read the student paper. Most college papers have some presence online. The paper can reveal issues and concerns on campus that aren't going to be mentioned by the admissions office. You can also check the local city paper and do a search on the college name for more information.

Research what activities are being held on campus. Which clubs are active? Does the school bring in a lot of speakers? Are there movies or concerts? How hard is it to find out about intramural sports? Is there transportation for off-campus shopping and activities? Does the campus support its athletic teams? You can usually find out how many people attend sporting events by looking up the individual game stats.

Determine what sort of resources are being offered by the career center. Does there seem to be lots of opportunities to interact with the career center staff? Do they offer networking events for internships and jobs? If you can't find this information, how will you find out about once you are on campus?

Visit department websites. This is a much more hit or miss proposition since some departments put a lot of effort into maintaining their webpages while others will only contain the basic information required by the college. If nothing else, look up the individual professors to see what their research interests are.

Check out faculty ratings at sites as RateMyProfessors.com. Such ratings will have limitations, specific faculty may not be listed, some people may have an ax to grind, etc. However, if you keep these limitations in mind, you might find some valuable information.

As you start digging into the various campus offerings and characteristics, you'll find other characteristics to look for that you hadn't thought of at first. If you have specific questions that aren't answered by the website, go ahead and ask someone in admissions.

You can also post such questions on forums like collegeconfidential.com or studentreview.com. As when using any such website, be aware that not all posters and answers are equal. People will usually know about one school based on their experiences, very few will actually have experience at two comparable schools. So when someone claims that school A is superior to school B, find out exactly what their experience is with school B.

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Don't have any idea of where to go to college?



Here's how to start making your list of colleges. If you're willing to step away from the rankings spotlight, you can find some impressive programs at great values. All it takes is a little time and a visit to one of the most ignored resources in creating a college list: the college website. [Find out more.](#)